

The Forward, May 18, 2007

Washington — America's fight for the hearts and minds of Arab television viewers throughout the Middle East is raising hackles on Capitol Hill.

A bipartisan group of nine members of the House of Representatives is calling for the dismissal of Larry Register, the vice president of news at the American-funded Alhurra television network. The lawmakers, all members of the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, which oversees funding of the Arabic satellite network, say that Alhurra — Arabic for “the free one” — has become a platform for anti-American forces in the region.

In a May 9 letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the congressmen wrote, “It makes no sense to have a State Department office dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism, while the Department funds and supports Mr. Register, who bears responsibility for Alhurra reporting that perpetuates anti-Semitic stereotypes.”

The lawmakers cited the extensive coverage of the Holocaust denial conference in Tehran last December, as well as a live broadcast of a speech by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in which he called for the killing of Israelis.

In the eye of the storm stands Register, a former CNN producer who was brought in to improve ratings and to make the American-run network a legitimate news and information source in the eyes of Arab viewers. As the executive in charge of news broadcasts, it is Register who approved the controversial newscasts and who lawmakers hope will pay with his job for allowing the contentious reports to air.

The uproar highlights one of the main dilemmas facing the American-sponsored broadcast system. Register, in his conversation with congressional staff members, has argued that in order to get the American message out to the Middle East, the network needs to compete successfully with such existing satellite TV giants as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. In order for that to happen, Register told Hill staffers, Alhurra needs to provide content similar to that of the other Arabic networks; only then will it be able to reach a mass audience and begin to spread a

message of moderation and democracy.

Lawmakers view this approach as a fundamental misunderstanding of the network's role.

"Alhurra's mission is not to be a hate-mongering competitor to Al Jazeera, but to be an oasis for viewers in the Arab world who are looking for a news broadcast which promotes freedom and democracy," said Democratic Rep. Steve Rothman of New Jersey. Along with Republican Rep. Mark Kirk of Illinois, Rothman organized the bipartisan congressional letter to Rice.

Founded three years ago, Alhurra has a budget of more than \$70 million. At first, the station was criticized for being irrelevant and for gaining no traction within the Arab world. American cooking programs and government-produced documentaries strengthened its reputation in the Middle East as a propaganda network that had no chance of competing with the up-to-the-minute news coverage of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. The network also underwent internal investigations into allegations of financial mishandling that led to the replacement of its former news director Muafak Harb, a Lebanese journalist.

On the other hand, Alhurra's sister radio network, Radio Sawa, is largely viewed as a success. It broadcasts hours of American pop music each day, except for a few minutes of occasional news reporting, and it is widely liked by younger listeners in the Middle East, according to polling data.

"There's a trade-off," said David Pollock, a former State Department diplomat who studied the issue of Arab attitudes toward America. "Once we put in a heavy message, we lose part of the audience. But if we stick to pop music, then we're not conveying the message."

Pollock, who is now a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, added that while debates over the content and approach of broadcast efforts to the Arab world go on, it is necessary to accept the limitations of any public diplomacy campaign. "We cannot turn the picture upside down and make America lovable. There are real differences, and no amount of fluff or of clever programming will be able to change that."

Congressional staffers said that while lawmakers from both sides of the aisle are furious at the conduct of Alhurra, they are not threatening to cut funding to the network or to Radio Sawa, both of which are seen as vital tools in public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East.

The first Alhurra broadcast that drew criticism occurred during last summer's war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The station aired a live speech by Nasrallah. After gunfire was heard in the background, he told his followers to stop shooting. "The only place where bullets should be is the chest of the enemies of Lebanon: the Israeli enemy," he declared.

The broadcast was not cut off; it went on until the speech was completed.

Several months later, Alhurra provided extensive coverage of the Holocaust denial conference in Tehran that the Iranian government sponsored. The Alhurra reporter on the ground portrayed the issue as a conflict between two different approaches, talking about Holocaust deniers and "Holocaust supporters."

Both incidents were described by the State Department, which funds Alhurra as part of its public diplomacy effort, as errors in judgment. The Middle East Broadcasting Networks, which oversees Alhurra TV as well as Radio Sawa, provided the Forward with a detailed response regarding the Holocaust denial conference.

"The correspondent's report on the Tehran conference in December was journalistically unacceptable," the supervisory agency said in a statement. "It included statements by the correspondent that should never be part of any Alhurra news report — statements contrary to Alhurra's standards of accuracy, balance and objectivity. That the report got to air reflects a breakdown in our system of internal controls." The statement also stressed that steps have been taken to prevent such errors from recurring, and that Alhurra "is committed to portraying the Holocaust in its true historical and humanitarian context."

Other complaints against Alhurra relate to several interviews with Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh — a representative of Hamas, a group on America's terror list. Officials from the network have told congressional staffers that the interviews were in the context of the Palestinian national unity government and had nothing to do with terror or anti-Israeli incitement.

On Capitol Hill, such explanations are considered insufficient, as the calls for Register's dismissal are supported by a majority of members of the subcommittee that approves funding for Alhurra and other American radio and TV operations around the world.

"The answers we've heard are simply not good enough," Rothman told the Forward, "especially facing what I see as a completely indefensible series of misjudgments by those running Alhurra."

One of the complaints raised against Register is that he does not speak Arabic and therefore, critics argue, he cannot appropriately control the content of Alhurra broadcasts.

With a lack of translated transcripts from the network, lawmakers say, little oversight is possible. The Congressmen who signed the letter to Rice jumped on the issue only after reading an article in The Wall Street Journal that detailed the instances in which a network paid for by American taxpayers had aired comments from officials of Al Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas.

In the letter to Rice, the lawmakers argued that in some instances the network has become a stage for terrorists.

"It goes against everything that our country stands for to literally hand terrorists a microphone," the lawmakers wrote. "To spread their vitriolic, hate-filled, anti-American and anti-Israel remarks."

Rice has yet to answer the letter. The issue, however, was expected to come up Wednesday, when the Middle East subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee was scheduled to hold a meeting with members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the American-sponsored broadcasts around the world.